

# Life Aboard the Fellow-Ship

*(excerpted from In the Grip of Grace)*

*Welcome with open arms fellow believers  
who don't see things the way you do.*

ROMANS 14:1 MSG

*Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you,  
in order to bring praise to God. ROMANS 15:7 NIV*

Grace makes three proclamations.

First, only God can forgive my godlessness. "Only God can forgive sins" (Mark 2:7). Dealing with my sins is God's responsibility. I repent, I confess, but only God can forgive. (And he does.)

Second, only God can judge my neighbor. "You cannot judge another person's servant. The master decides if the servant is doing well or not" (Rom. 14:4). Dealing with my neighbor is God's responsibility. I must speak; I must pray. But only God can convince. (And he does.)

Third, I must accept who God accepts. "Christ accepted you, so you should accept each other, which will bring glory to God" (Rom. 15:7). God loves me and makes me his child. God loves my neighbor and makes him my brother. My privilege is to complete the triangle, to close the circuit by loving who God loves.

Easier said than done. "To live above with those we love, oh, how that will be glory. To live below with those we know, now that's another story." Best I can figure the situation reads something like this...

## *Rocking the Boat*

God has enlisted us in his navy and placed us on his ship. The boat has one purpose—to carry us safely to the other shore.

This is no cruise ship; it's a battleship. We aren't called to a life of leisure; we are called to a life of service. Each of us has a different task. Some, concerned with those who are drowning, are snatching people from the water. Others are occupied with the enemy, so they man the cannons of prayer and worship. Still others devote themselves to the crew, feeding and training the crew members.

Though different, we are the same. Each can tell of a personal encounter with the captain, for

each has received a personal call. He found us among the shanties of the seaport and invited us to follow him. Our faith was born at the sight of his fondness, and so we went.

We each followed him across the gangplank of his grace onto the same boat. There is one captain and one destination. Though the battle is fierce, the boat is safe, for our captain is God. The ship will not sink. For that, there is no concern.

There is concern, however, regarding the disharmony of the crew. When we first boarded we assumed the crew was made up of others like us. But as we've wandered these decks, we've encountered curious converts with curious appearances. Some wear uniforms we've never seen, sporting styles we've never witnessed. "Why do you look the way you do?" we ask them.

"Funny," they reply. "We were about to ask the same of you."

The variety of dress is not nearly as disturbing as the plethora of opinions. There is a group, for example, who clusters every morning for serious study. They promote rigid discipline and somber expressions. "Serving the captain is serious business," they explain. It's no coincidence that they tend to congregate around the stern.

There is another regiment deeply devoted to prayer. Not only do they believe in prayer, they believe in prayer by kneeling. For that reason you always know where to locate them; they are at the bow of the ship.

And then there are a few who staunchly believe real wine should be used in the Lord's Supper. You'll find them on the port side.

Still another group has positioned themselves near the engine. They spend hours examining the nuts and bolts of the boat. They've been known to go below deck and not come up for days. They are occasionally criticized by those who linger on the top deck, feeling the wind in their hair and the sun on their face. "It's not what you learn," those topside argue. "It's what you feel that matters."

And, oh, how we tend to cluster.

Some think once you're on the boat, you can't get off. Others say you'd be foolish to go overboard, but the choice is yours.

Some believe you volunteer for service; others believe you were destined for the service before the ship was even built.

Some predict a storm of great tribulation will strike before we dock; others say it won't hit until we are safely ashore.

There are those who speak to the captain in a personal language. There are those who think such languages are extinct.

There are those who think the officers should wear robes, there are those who think there should be no officers at all, and there are those who think we are all officers and should all wear robes.

And, oh, how we tend to cluster.

And then there is the issue of the weekly meeting at which the captain is thanked and his words are read. All agree on its importance, but few agree on its nature. Some want it loud, others quiet. Some want ritual, others spontaneity. Some want to celebrate so they can meditate; others meditate so they can celebrate. Some want a meeting for those who've gone overboard. Others want to reach those overboard but without going overboard and neglecting those on board.

And, oh, how we tend to cluster.

The consequence is a rocky boat. There is trouble on deck. Fights have broken out. Sailors have refused to speak to each other. There have even been times when one group refused to acknowl-

edge the presence of others on the ship. Most tragically, some adrift at sea have chosen not to board the boat because of the quarreling of the sailors.

“What do we do?” we’d like to ask the captain. “How can there be harmony on the ship?” We don’t have to go far to find the answer.

On the last night of his life Jesus prayed a prayer that stands as a citadel for all Christians:

I pray for these followers, but I am also praying for all those who will believe in me because of their teaching. Father, I pray that they can be one. As you are in me and I am in you, I pray that they can also be one in us. Then the world will believe that you sent me. (John 17:20)

How precious are these words. Jesus, knowing the end is near, prays one final time for his followers. Striking, isn’t it, that he prayed not for their success, their safety, or their happiness.

He prayed for their unity. He prayed that they would love each other.

As he prayed for them, he also prayed for “those who will believe because of their teaching.” That means us! In his last prayer Jesus prayed that you and I be one.

## *The Command of Acceptance*

Of all the lessons we can draw from this verse, don’t miss the most important: Unity matters to God. The Father does not want his kids to squabble. Disunity disturbs him. Why? Because “all people will know that you are my followers if you love each other” (John 13:35). Unity creates belief. How will the world believe that Jesus was sent by God? Not if we agree with each other. Not if we solve every controversy. Not if we are unanimous on each vote. Not if we never make a doctrinal error. But if we love one another.

Unity creates belief. Disunity fosters disbelief. Who wants to board a ship of bickering sailors? Life on the ocean may be rough, but at least the waves don’t call us names.

Paul Billheimer may very well be right when he says:

The continuous and widespread fragmentation of the Church has been the scandal of the ages. It has been Satan’s master strategy. The sin of disunity probably has caused more souls to be lost than all other sins combined.”<sup>2</sup>

“All people will know that you are my followers if you love each other.” Stop and think about this verse for a minute. Could it be that *unity* is the key to reaching the world for Christ?

If unity is the key to evangelism, shouldn’t it have precedence in our prayers? Shouldn’t we, as Paul said, “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3 NW)? If unity matters to God, then shouldn’t unity matter to us? If unity is a priority in heaven, then shouldn’t it be a priority on earth?

Nowhere, by the way, are we told to *build* unity. We are told simply to *keep* unity. From God’s perspective there is but “one flock and one shepherd” (John 10:16). Unity does not need to be created; it simply needs to be protected.

How do we do that? How do we make every effort to keep the unity? Does that mean we compromise our convictions? No. Does that mean we abandon the truths we cherish? No. But it

does mean we look long and hard at the attitudes we carry.

## *A Case Study in Capernaum*

Sometime ago Denalyn bought a monkey. I didn't want a monkey in our house, so I objected.

"Where is he going to eat?" I asked.

"At our table."

"Where is he going to sleep?" I inquired.

"In our bed."

"What about the odor?" I demanded.

"I got used to you; I guess the monkey can too."

Unity doesn't begin in examining others but in examining self. Unity begins, not in demanding that others change, but in admitting that we aren't so perfect ourselves.

For a great example of this, go to a village called Capernaum and enter a small house occupied by Jesus and the disciples. Listen as the Master asks them a question. "What were you arguing about on the road?" (Mark 9:33).

The disciples' faces flush, not red with anger but pink with embarrassment. They had argued. About doctrine? No. Over strategy? Not that either. Ethics and values? Sorry. They had argued about which of them was the greatest.

Peter thought he was (he'd walked on water). John laid claim to the top slot (he was Jesus' favorite). Matthew boasted he was the best (after all, his book would be first in the New Testament). Power plays and one-upmanship. Is that where division usually begins?

Where jealousy and selfishness are, there will be confusion and every kind of evil. (James 3:16)

Do you know where your fights and arguments come from? They come from the selfish desires that wage war within you. (James 4:1)

Remarkable. Jockeying for position in the very presence of Christ. But not as remarkable as Jesus' response to them.

"Whoever *accepts* a child like this in my name *accepts* me. And whoever *accepts* me *accepts* the One who sent me" (Mark 9:37 italics mine).

Jesus felt so strongly about acceptance that he used the word four times in one sentence.

The answer to arguments? Acceptance. The first step to unity? Acceptance. Not agreement, acceptance. Not unanimity, acceptance. Not negotiation, arbitration, or elaboration. Those might come later but only after the first step, acceptance.

Such an answer troubles John. Too simplistic. The Son of Thunder was unacquainted with tolerance. Why, you just don't go around "accepting" people! Fences have to be built. Boundaries are a necessary part of religion. Case in point? John has one.

## *The Test of Divergence*

“Teacher, we saw someone using your name to force demons out of a person. We told him to stop, because he does not belong to our group” (Mark 9:38).

John has a dilemma. He and the other disciples ran into someone who was doing great work. This man was casting out demons (the very act the disciples had trouble doing in Mark 9:20). He was changing lives. And, what’s more, the man was giving the credit to God. He was doing it in the name of Christ.

Everything about him was so right. Right results. Right heart. But there was one problem. He was from the wrong group.

So the disciples did what any able-bodied religious person would do with someone from the wrong group. They escorted him to the hull of the boat and put him in confinement. “We told him to stop, because he does not belong to our group” (v. 38).

John wants to know if they did the right thing. John’s not cocky; he’s confused. So are many people today. What do you do about good things done in another group? What do you do when you like the fruit but not the orchard?

I’ve asked that question. I am deeply appreciative of my heritage. It was through a small, West Texas Church of Christ that I came to know the Nazarene, the cross, and the Word. The congregation wasn’t large, maybe two hundred on a good Sunday. Most of the families were like mine, blue-collar oil-field workers. But it was a loving church. When our family was sick, the members visited us. When we were absent, they called. And when this prodigal returned, they embraced me.

I deeply appreciate my heritage. But through the years, my faith has been supplemented by people of other groups. I wasn’t long on God’s ship before I found encouragement in other staterooms.

A Brazilian Pentecostal taught me about prayer. A British Anglican by the name of C. S. Lewis put muscle in my faith. A Southern Baptist helped me understand grace.

One Presbyterian, Steve Brown, taught me about God’s sovereignty while another, Frederick Buechner, taught me about God’s passion. A Catholic, Brennan Manning, convinced me that Jesus is relentlessly tender. I’m a better husband because I read James Dobson and a better preacher because I listened to Chuck Swindoll and Bill Hybels.

And only when I get home will I learn the name of a radio preacher whose message steered me back to Christ. I was a graduate student who’d lost his bearings. Needing some money over Christmas break, I took a job driving an oil-field delivery truck. The radio only picked up one station. A preacher was preaching. On a cold December day in 1978 I heard him describe the cross. I don’t know his name. I don’t know his heritage. He could have been a Quaker or an angel or both for all I know. But something about what he said caused me to pull the pickup onto the side of the road and rededicate my life to Christ.

## *Examine the Fruit and the Faith*

What do you do when you see great works done by folks of other groups? Not divisive acts, not heretical teachings, but good works that give glory to God? Let’s return to the conversation

between Jesus and the disciples.

Before you note what Jesus said to John, note what he didn't say.

Jesus did not say, "John, if the people are nice, they are in." Generous gestures and benevolent acts are not necessarily a sign of a disciple. Just because a group is distributing toys at Christmas doesn't mean they are Christians. Just because they are feeding the hungry does not mean they are the honored ones of God. Jesus doesn't issue a call for blind tolerance.

Nor does he endorse blanket rejection. If unanimity of opinion were necessary for fellowship, this would have been a perfect time for Jesus to say so. But he didn't. Jesus didn't hand John a book of regulations by which to measure every candidate. Were such a checklist necessary, this would have been the ideal time to give it. But he didn't.

Look at what Jesus did say: "Don't stop him, because anyone who uses my name to do powerful things will not easily say evil things about me" (Mark 9:39).

Jesus was impressed with the man's *pure faith* ("... who uses my name") and his powerful fruit ("... to do powerful things"). His answer offers us a crucial lesson on studied tolerance. How should you respond to a good heart from a different religious heritage?

First, look at the fruit. Is it good? Is it healthy? Is he or she helping or hurting people? Production is more important than pedigree. The fruit is more important than the name of the orchard. If the person is bearing fruit, be grateful! A good tree cannot produce bad fruit (see Matt. 7:17), so be thankful that God is at work in other groups than yours.

But also look at the faith. In whose name is the work done? Jesus was accepting of this man's work because it was done in the name of Christ. What does it mean to do something "in the name of Jesus"? It means you are under the authority of and empowered by that name.

If I go to a car dealership and say I want a free car, the salespeople are going to laugh at me. If, however, I go with a letter written and signed by the owner of the dealership granting me a free car, then I drive off in a free car. Why? Because I am there under the authority of and empowered by the owner.

The Master says examine the person's faith. If he or she has faith in Jesus and is empowered by God, grace says that's enough. This is an important point. There are some who do not work in God's name. Remember the rock-stackers and the finger-pointers in the parable? They present a salvation of works rather than a salvation of grace. They are not working in the name of God, indeed they do not need God. They are working under the banner of human-merit self-righteousness. Just as Paul was intolerant of self-salvation, we must be as well.

But there are believers in many different heritages who cast their hope in God's firstborn Son and put their faith in the cross of Christ. If they, like you, are trusting him to carry them to the father's castle, don't you share a common Savior? If their trust, like yours, is in the all-sufficient sacrifice of Christ, aren't you covered with the same grace?

You mean they don't have to be in my group? No.

They don't have to share my background? They don't.

They don't have to see everything the way I do? Does anyone?

What is important is their fruit and their faith. Later, a much more tempered Son of Thunder would reduce it to this. "Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God has God living inside, and that person lives in God" (I John 4:15).

Ironically, the one who challenged the simple answer of the Master eventually rendered the simplest answer himself.

It should be simple. Where there is faith, repentance, and a new birth, there is a Christian. When

I meet a man whose faith is in the cross and whose eyes are on the Savior, I meet a brother. Wasn't that Paul's approach? When he wrote the church in Corinth, he addressed a body of Christians guilty of every sin from abusing the Lord's Supper to arguing over the Holy Spirit. But how does he address them? "I beg you, brothers and sisters" (I Cor. 1:10).

When the church in Rome was debating whether to eat meat offered to idols, did Paul tell them to start two churches? One for the meat-eaters and one for the non-meat-eaters? No, on the contrary, he urged, "Christ accepted you, so you should accept each other, which will bring glory to God" (Rom. 15:7).

Is God asking us to do anything more than what he has already done? Hasn't he gone a long way in accepting us? If God can tolerate my mistakes, can't I tolerate the mistakes of others? If God allows me, with my foibles and failures, to call him Father, shouldn't I extend the same grace to others? In fact, who can offer grace except those secure in the grip of grace? If God doesn't demand perfection, should I?

"They are God's servants," Paul reminds us, "not yours. They are responsible to him, not to you. Let him tell them whether they are right or wrong. And God is able to make them do as they should" (Rom. 14:4TLB).

God's ship is a grand vessel. Just as a ship has many rooms, so God's kingdom has room for many opinions. But just as a ship has one deck, God's kingdom has a common ground: the all-sufficient sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Will you pray with me for the day when Jesus' prayer is answered?

Will you pray with me for the day when the world is won because the church is one?

Will you pray with me for the day when we come out of our rooms and stand together to salute our captain? When clusters cease and the chorus commences?

Jesus' final prayer before the cross was for the unity of his followers. Would he offer a prayer that couldn't be answered? I don't think so either.